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PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV  
DE RUEHLB #0754/01 1441452  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 231452Z MAY 08  
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2005  
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE  
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2365  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2672  
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000754

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA  
ALSO FOR IO A/S SILVERBERG AND PDAS WARLICK  
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/KUMAR/PHEE  
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/GAVITO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/22/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: A CONFIDENT AOUN BELIEVES OPPOSITION WILL  
GET FINANCE, DEFENSE MINISTRIES

REF: A. BEIRUT 733

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 748

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY  
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[1](#)1. (C) A confident and cheerful Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun told the Charge on May 23 that the Finance Ministry was most important cabinet seat for the opposition in the upcoming cabinet formation, followed by Interior and Defense. The other ministries were less important, in the short-term, because Aoun anticipates a new government will be formed following the spring 2009 parliamentary elections. Aoun seems confident that his alliance will be selecting the Finance and Defense Ministries, and we deduce that the opposition will appoint as ministers Shia individuals with government experience.

[1](#)2. (C) Aoun envisions establishing counterinsurgency and counterterrorism units in the Lebanese Armed Forces as well as forming an intelligence oversight committee. He anticipates that a settlement on Hizballah's arms will be reached. End summary.

FINANCE MINISTRY  
MOST IMPORTANT  
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[1](#)3. (C) The Charge, accompanied by PolOff, met with Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun and his advisor and son-in-law Gebran Bassil at his home in Rabieh on May 23. In surprisingly relaxed and pleasant spirits, Aoun stressed that the Finance Minister is the most important position because he signs "99 percent of the legislation bills."

[1](#)4. (C) He weighed the Interior Minister as the second most important position because of its oversight on several politicized issues including electoral law, voter registration, and the Internal Security Forces. "It influences the direction of the country. However, if the Boutros law is enacted, the Interior Ministry will not affect the electoral issues because an independent commission will be established."

[1](#)5. (C) Bassil explained that this commission, while very complicated, would be composed of judges, security forces'

representatives, and other specialists, and would control the election process instead of the Interior Minister. Aoun mentioned the possibility of registering Lebanese expatriates to vote, a move he favors but which, he noted, the current Minister of Interior has intentionally stalled.

¶6. (C) While the Defense Ministry is important, Aoun continued, it is less critical than Finance or Interior in his view. In the short-term, both the Justice and Foreign Affairs Ministries are less important than Finance, Interior, and Defense, from Aoun's point of view, because the new ministers will likely only serve one year until the end of spring 2009 parliamentary elections.

¶7. (C) Aoun anticipates that the new president (current LAF Commander Michel Sleiman) will choose the Interior Minister, and will likely select a "consensus candidate." He added that as army commander, Sleiman does not run in political circles, and therefore may be more inclined to select a general for one of his three positions to fill in the new cabinet.

¶8. (C) Expressing his pleasure that he and his allies in the opposition acquired 11 of the 30 Cabinet posts from the Doha agreement (Ref A), Aoun insisted that his alliance will not have a "blocking minority." He explained that the 11 seats were crucial to the opposition because now his alliance has the opportunity to delay controversial decisions and allow for discussion. "It will be fair for all parties," he declared. He postulated that his FPM party may vote on the same side as the majority on certain issues, such as economic matters, but would block something major.

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FORMING THE REST  
OF THE GOVERNMENT  
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¶9. (C) Aoun said that the new president will choose the new LAF Commander in conjunction with the Minister of Defense. He stressed that the head of the army is a very critical position because the LAF is a fragile institution and faces the threat of terrorism, which affects all Lebanese. Dodging the Charge's inquiry as to the identity of the likely candidate, Aoun said that when he was LAF Commander, he looked to appoint people that he trusted would carry out the Commander's orders.

¶10. (C) The new government could be formed in less than a week, Aoun suggested. He asserted that Hizballah will definitely be a part of the new government, as they were when the last cabinet was formed in 2005.

STRATEGIZING ABOUT  
RESTRUCTURING THE LAF  
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¶11. (C) Citing his military experience which includes official visits to the U.S., and in particular, the Pentagon, in 1966, 1978, 1983, and 2005, Aoun said he will call for the establishment of military and intelligence oversight committees in Parliament, similar to the USG's House Armed Services Committee, Senate Committee on Armed Services, House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Noting that he has been requesting this for two years, he said that there needs to be an entity to investigate the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF) actions in situations such as Nahr al-Barid.

¶12. (C) He further recommended that the new Defense Minister restructure the LAF to create counterinsurgency and counterterrorism units. He argued that the LAF needs to be strengthened in these areas for future "Nahr al-Barids -- the new threats." This should be centrally coordinated between the Surete Generale, the LAF G-2 (military intelligence), and

the Internal Security Forces' (ISF) Information Branch, he said, with a decision-maker leading the effort.

¶13. (C) Establishing these two units would not necessarily require an increase in resources, Aoun proposed, suggesting the redistribution of existing officers. When Charge asked who Aoun predicted the next Defense Minister would be, he responded, "If it is us or someone else as the Minister, he will take his ideas from me. His work originates here."

A SETTLEMENT WILL BE REACHED  
ON HIZBALLAH'S ARMS  
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¶14. (C) Bassil credited Aoun for efforts to put Hizballah's arms on the negotiating table. He said that before the July 2006 war, Aoun was insisting this issue be raised. Aoun said with confidence, "I think we will reach a settlement."

DOHA AGREEMENT NOT A SURPRISE  
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¶15. (C) In contrast to what other Doha participants have told us (Ref B), Aoun said the Doha agreement did not surprise him at all. He added that the agreement was negotiated "even before we went to Doha." He relayed that only three parties were involved throughout the process. He conjectured that others could have been surprised because "they were betting on a different outcome, or, they were not involved." He does not expect that the constitutional amendment issue to elect Sleiman (Ref B) will be a problem.

COMMENT  
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¶16. (C) Given that those close to Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt have told us they believe Aoun is finished, we were quite surprised to see a cheerful, confident man, especially since he must finally be internalizing that he will not be

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the next president. Aoun certainly did not act as if he were finished, in fact, he was more confident than ever that his alliance will name the next Finance and Defense Ministers.

¶17. (C) Aoun refused to name candidates, but when Charge pushed him for names of potential candidates, he listed the five "resigned" Shia ministers. We infer from that that Shia individuals with government experience will be the opposition's candidates for its key positions. End comment.

SISON